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World
Counterattack

The Soviets blame the CIA

Even by the standards of the Soviet Union's often inflammatory official daily newspaper, last week's tirade was one for the books. "The dirty snowball of lies and slander now rolling over the pages of the Western press will sooner or later melt under the rays of the truth," *Pravda* declared. "Only dirt will remain, which will stain for a long time the political reputation of those who were helping to mold that snowball." The target of the unusual vituperation: widespread suspicions in the West that the KGB plotted or abetted or was at least aware of the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II in May 1981, with the Bulgarian secret police serving as its proxy.

The strongly worded reactions were a sign of how seriously the Soviets take the accusations, which have grown out of a continuing Italian investigation into the attempt by Turkish Terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca to assassinate the Pope. Agca, who was sentenced to life imprisonment last July, has told Italian investigators that his accomplices included three Bulgarian agents, two of whom, he said, drove him to St. Peter's Square the day of the shooting.

The Soviet press also charged that the CIA had fabricated rumors of Soviet and Bulgarian involvement in the papal plot in order to undermine the Warsaw Pact. The "Bulgarian connection," a Soviet TV commentator noted, is like the Reichstag fire that was believed to have been set by Hitler's agents and blamed on Communists, thus helping to consolidate Nazi power. Said the Soviet newsman: "Half a century later, antisocialists are [again] preparing a war against the socialist community." A day later, Radio Moscow predicted confidently that Sergei Ivanov Antonov, one of the Bulgarians fingered by Agca, would be released after testimony from witnesses that Antonov had been at his Balkan Airlines office at the time of the shooting. TASS implicitly dismissed speculation that the Soviets were motivated to kill the Pope by his support of Poland's Solidarity trade union. In fact, the agency said, the Soviet Union was being victimized by John Paul, who is "conservative and rigid."

At his press conference, President Reagan said he could not comment on the case while the Italian investigation was under way. Privately, officials expressed concern that any U.S. reply would play into the Soviets' hands. Said a Washington official: "By responding in any way to the Soviet charges that this is just a CIA plot, we would be adding stature and weight to those ridiculous charges."

Meanwhile, Turkish judicial authorities are probing Agca's role in the fatal shooting of a liberal newspaper editor in Istanbul in 1979; Agca was convicted of the murder. The Turkish government also requested the extradition from Bulgaria of another Turk, Bekir Çelenk, whom Agca has reportedly accused of offering him $1.25 million to kill the Pope.

Antonov's lawyers have demanded that their client be freed on the basis of testimony by ten Italian and Bulgarian witnesses who swear he was not in Agca's company on the day of the shooting or the two days prior to it, as Agca has claimed. This week Ilario Martella, the Italian magistrate investigating the papal plot, must come to a decision on Antonov's alibis. It may hinge on other evidence he is gathering. West Germany informed Martella last week that it had agreed to his request for the extradition of Musa Serdar Çelebi, a right-wing Turkish extremist whom Magistrate Martella has accused of complicity in Agca's crime. Martella also went to Munich to interview another Turk, Atalai Saral, for the investigation. Said Martella of his meeting with Saral: "Very interesting." ■

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